

PURITANISM VERSUS PROFESSIONALISM IN ART

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RAPPING the Puritans on the knuckles has never been more in vogue than at present—particularly in the world of art. The popular prejudice against Puritanism has the same roots as most popular prejudices—the ignorance or hasty judgment of some, the malice of others. Puritanism and the artistic temperament are not mutually exclusive. Puritanism recognizes the artist as a developer of the human race on its climb toward the spiritual goal and Puritanism encourages self expression in art. The attitude of the Puritan toward art is of especial significance in America in whose founding the Puritans had so large a share and in whose life today, in spite of much continental veneer, Puritan tendencies still play an important though sometimes unrecognized part. The essence of Puritanism is the placing of emphasis on the spirit rather than the form. Puritanism has always opposed and still does oppose professionalism, (the exclusive and formal attitude), in art as well as in religion.

The historical origin and development of Puritanism throw light upon its attitude toward art and life. In the sixteenth century Puritanism originated as a movement against uniformity, formalism and decadence. The Puritans protested against elaboration in church services and church art and antagonized an age in which religious and art ideals were low. Later, in Elizabeth's reign, these troublesome enemies to ritual received the nickname of Puritans (from the Latin *puritas*). The unfriendly attitude of Elizabeth and the bishops caused the exodus of the Puritan-Separatists or Pilgrims to Holland and later to the New World where their policies were reinforced by Puritans who emigrated directly from England to America. Those Puritans who remained in England worked for reform inside the church of England, until the Toleration Act of 1689 gave to the dissenting bodies of England permanent though not complete freedom of worship. Joseph E. Crouch of Kenilworth,

England, in his volume *Puritanism and Art* makes an elaborate historical defense of Puritans in relation to English drama, literature, graphic arts, architecture and popular amusements, in which he shows how bitterly state and clergy opposed them.

All these struggles against ironclad traditions increased the original bias of the Puritans for freedom of opportunity, for simplicity and reality of expression. The only art which can survive the ages has the quality of universality—it must not be the exclusive possession of a privileged class. The Puritans revolted against snobbishness in art—against its appropriation by priests and by the aristocracy. They wished for an art and form of worship comprehensible to simple people rather than directed toward the understanding of trained experts alone. Puritanism is unalterably opposed to useless elaboration and exaggerated symbolism. It gets down to the bed rock of human nature, so does art which endures. True art resembles religion in seeking the ideal in the real—it abhors the artificial. Puritanism increased the culture of the middle classes and decreased esoterism in art. It brought a sense of reality to art and to religion.

The Puritans believed that the reform movement must sweep away whatever threatened reality and simplicity. They believed that the multiplication of saints to be worshipped was superstition, they therefore objected to the endless observance of saints' days and to continual féting of saints' images and of paintings of saints on glass and canvas. No doubt Puritanism like every great reform movement had its "lunatic fringe." The Puritans did serious wrong in so far as they destroyed any form of noble art and in so doing they misrepresented Christ's teaching which combined emphasis on self control with emphasis on beauty. But the Puritans were not alone to blame. An even greater demolisher of church art was Henry VIII who acted from personal motives. The Renaissance, inspired by hostility toward Gothic art, also had a hand in the destruction of ancient church art.

Undeniably the Puritans of England did turn the cold shoulder on decorative art. They neglected art in building and church services because their constant persecutions by the state church prevented that mental detachment which is conducive to the cultivation of the arts in church life, and because the arts had become so perverted and formalized in church services that they felt impelled to prohibit them entirely from their meeting houses. They distrusted sensuous imagery as an aid to faith, and so some extremists among

them came to extol paucity as if it were a virtue. Yet in America they built not only solidly but artistically. The early churches of New England are superior in harmony and unity of architecture to most of our modern ones. The best architecture in America today is the colonial—a survival of Puritan building. Modern American craftsmen in furniture and metalware are going back to Puritan designs for a living source of inspiration.

Of course the Puritans helped along the factory system and the enlargement of industry, for their enemies had pushed them out of other callings. Yet, although Puritanism was a middle class movement, characterized by industrial development, it was not only to preserve some of the most valuable of antique art, it was to give birth to a new art.

Oliver Cromwell, often berated as a Puritan-bigot, came to the rescue of antique art. Charles I was a collector and connoisseur of art, but the art of his time was exclusively for the delectation of court circles. After England's Civil War many of Charles' art treasures were sold to pay his debts and those of the queen; and the proceeds of the sale of other art treasures of his were used for public purposes. But Cromwell preserved the most valuable pictures in Charles' collection: he enjoyed masterpieces of painting and sculpture. It was he who preserved the famous Raphael cartoons for the nation.

The Puritans introduced a new art. Art as the official medium of the church had grown lifeless. Then came protestantism which stood for simplicity and sincerity as opposed to elaborate stereotyped art. Protestantism brought a fresher more direct note to painting. Albrecht Dürer, a protestant and a forerunner of the Puritan in his cast of thought, painted with power, freshness and reality, religious themes which had become formalized. He radically departed from official art and brought art to the homes of the people.

English Puritan art was nourished by the new art of Holland. The Puritans of England were deeply influenced by the Protestantism of Holland. Some of them had fought in the wars of the Netherlands for civil and religious independence. Puritan families who emigrated to Holland seeking freedom from worship came in contact with Dutch art. In the 17th century Holland was the seat of Protestant art: having wrought out her political and religious independence, she developed an art which is still unsurpassed. The Protestant has always placed great emphasis on the home; so it came about that the art of Holland was largely dedicated to the home.

Art which in the past had usually been confined to aristocrats now delighted the eyes of the people. The Dutch painted the things they loved—the land and sea, the fruits and flowers of the fields they cultivated—painted these things naturally and joyously. They also loved to paint biblical scenes, not in a stereotyped traditional way, but unconventionally and with deep feeling. Rembrandt was the product of protestantism. Protestantism did not thwart the development of his genius nor render it narrowly didactic.

Protestant painting was democratic. It breathed sympathy for humble folk. Catholic and court painters showed Christ as a King in royal robes surrounded by courtiers. Protestant art showed Him as the Friend of lowly human beings. Protestant art glorified the toil of everyday people. It was Protestantism which gave to art these human characteristics: it freed the mind from the frosty grip of classicism.

English Puritanism brought art out of formalism to a study of Nature. Puritan artists and writers were pioneers in the direct appreciation of Nature. The Puritan Hogarth is called the father of modern art in England. The Puritan Spenser is accredited with having put life and beauty into English song. James Thomson of Scotland wrote *The Seasons*. Milton, the Puritan, wrote *Areopagitica*, an inspired plea for freedom in creative art. The Puritan Bunyan vivified his work by word paintings of nature. Two generations of Puritanism produced Gainsborough, portraitist and landscapist. His originality, independence and direct appreciation of nature were Puritan qualities, so was his love of music in the home. His work is full of kindness, happiness, poetry and sensibility.

The early masters of landscape painting in England were born in East Anglia, the nursery of English puritanism—Gainsborough, at Sudbury, John Crome and John Bernay Crome, at Norwich, John Constable, at East Bergholt, John Sell Colman, at Norwich. John Constable was the first to bring color and atmosphere into landscape painting. The English landscapists including also Bonington, Fielding, Prout and others dealt the death blow to classical painting; they greatly influenced French landscape painters, including the insurrectionist Delacroix who went to England to study them and frankly acknowledged his debt to them. The schools at Barbizon and the artist Millet were born on the wave of influence which Puritan landscape painters in England started. This in turn led to the best landscape painting of today.

Protestantism and Puritanism liberated pictorial art from professionalism—from exclusive appropriation by church and palace.

The greatest artist of Germany, Dürer, was a protestant. Modern art was born in Protestant Holland and modern painting in Puritan England. English Puritanism of the 17th and 18th centuries stood for the citizen and home ideal, for a living indiginous art. The cultured of that day who jeered at the Puritans were at the same time benefitting by the freedom which the Puritans had secured, just as those who jeer at Puritanism in modern America are comfortably resting on the foundations which Puritan pioneers laid in constant perils and hardships.

Puritanism is a protest against a superstitious dependence on the symbol to the exclusion of a higher faith. Our modern independent artists in their scorn of Puritanism forget that the Puritan from the beginning has been an independent in continual revolt against the letter of the law, and a crusader for its spirit.